

Writing a Great Research Paper: Perfecting Your Final Draft *Study Guide*

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Writing a Great Research Paper: Perfecting Your Final Draft

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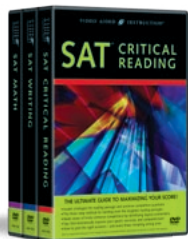
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Writing a Great Research Paper: Perfecting Your Final Draft Study Guide

Introduction

In this last program in our series, you'll learn how to rework your research paper until it is a shining example of effective writing, clear organization, and sound research—and is completely free of errors in grammar, usage, mechanics, spelling, and scholarly citation. Best of all, you'll hand in a final draft that makes you sound smarter and better informed and is sure to earn you a higher grade!

For easier studying and maximum success, we recommend that you view the program over a number of short sessions: don't try to absorb too much at one time. Review the entire program, or specific sections, as many times as you find necessary in order to master the material.

Perhaps most importantly: Don't forget to take advantage of your "pause" button while viewing the program. Keep plenty of scrap paper handy so you can jot down ideas, work through concepts, and more. And finally, be sure to use the myriad on-screen graphics to take notes for yourself—when you're done, you'll have a notebook you can refer back to again and again.

About Your Instructor

Karl Weber, M.A., is an educator, editor, and bestselling author in fields ranging from business to politics to test preparation. He has worked on books with such noted figures as management guru Adrian Slywotzky, Loews Hotels CEO Jonathan M. Tisch, and President Jimmy Carter.

Part 1: Good Writing Is Rewriting

Remember the quote from Voltaire that we mentioned earlier in this series: “The perfect is the enemy of the good”! Well, that was certainly true for your first draft, when you wanted to get as many thoughts down as possible. But “good” isn’t really enough for your **final** draft, is it? You want to do everything you can to make it **perfect**.

Of course, that means no typos, no glaring omissions, no flimsy arguments, and no missing references. But that also should include revising your paper a few times through a number of drafts—rewriting, adding, and deleting material as necessary.

Throughout your revision process, you might want to try the following exercise. Continually ask yourself:

- How would an A+ paper on my topic approach this?
- How would the smartest kid in my class articulate what I’m trying to say?

Whenever you determine an answer to one these questions, our advice is simple: do that! It’s actually **much easier** than it sounds. With research papers—as with many things in life—a huge part of getting it right is a commitment to **trying** to get it right.

You should try to give yourself a day or so between drafts, so you can look at your writing with “fresher eyes”—sometimes it can feel like you’re reading it for the first time, or even like you’re reading somebody else’s writing, and all of that “distance” makes you more objective.

As you rework your paper, be sure to save every single draft you create. You don’t want to find yourself tweaking a certain sentence in your final draft and thinking: “You know what? I’m pretty sure I said that more succinctly in my third draft. Uh-oh...where’s my third draft?” So keep everything as you go along. You may even want to use version numbers as the software industry does—e.g., “Research Paper 2.0”!

But how do you know when to put that red pen down? Well, you should stop editing only when you feel like you’re just editing for editing’s sake, just making little changes here and there but not really making substantial improvements. And don’t let the deadline be the thing that dictates when to stop editing: if you’ve planned your time effectively, you should be putting the final touches on your research paper well before the deadline hits. You should turn in your final draft only when you’re convinced that:

- your paper more than satisfies the assignment,
- you’ve said everything you **need** to say,
- you’ve said pretty much everything you **want** to say, and
- you’ve said it all about as well as you possibly could have.

Part 2: Reworking for Content

With your **notes** and **key sources** handy (along with your **style guide**), ask yourself the following:

- Does my paper satisfy all of the elements of the original assignment? Typically, these elements include requirements regarding:
 - The number and assortment of types of research sources
 - The types of content (the assignment probably included directions like “analyze,” “compare,” “review,” “describe,” “explain,” “define,” etc.—did I follow the directions?)
 - The length of the paper (either a word count or page count—many software programs include a built-in “Word Count” function; in Microsoft Word™ and OpenOffice Writer, for example, this feature is usually found under the “Tools” menu)
- Are the contents of my paper rich enough, thorough enough, and complete enough to deserve a high grade? And is it long enough? If not:
 - Add one or more additional pieces of evidence (examples, quotations, anecdotes, events) to further strengthen your argument.
 - Insert or expand a discussion of one or more opposing points of view.

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- Search out any topics in the paper that aren't fully explained, clearly described, or adequately defended. To locate these "weak spots," try creating an outline of your first draft, noting the number of paragraphs you devoted to each major subtopic, example, argument, etc. You can even use various colored pens, highlighters, or markers on a draft copy of your paper, color-coding each of these various areas. Then skim through your paper, making a mental note of the numbers of paragraphs or how often each color appears relative to the others. If you see lots of only one, two, or three colors, or if you see some significantly larger numbers, consider developing your other subtopics, examples, or arguments further: they might be getting short shrift.
- Determine whether you have relied too heavily on one or more sources: if you have, consider referencing additional sources. Again, try using various colored pens, highlighters, or markers on a draft copy of your paper, color-coding each research source you've referenced. Then skim through the colors you see throughout your paper, making a mental note of how often each color appears relative to the others. If you see too much of only one, two, or three colors, consider referencing additional sources. (If you don't see much color at all, you haven't referenced enough sources in your paper!)

Once you've reworked for **content** on your own, ask some friends, classmates, or relatives who are good **debaters** to read through the latest draft of your paper. Ask them to point out any "weak spots" in your arguments and offer any other suggestions for enriching your content. Once you've implemented their recommendations, review your latest draft (following the advice we've given above one more time).

Part 3: Reworking for Style

With a **thesaurus** and **grammar textbook** handy (along with your **style guide**), ask yourself the following:

- Are my ideas clear and understandable? Do they flow gracefully from one point to the next?
Be sure to:
 - Make sure your ideas are in a logical order.
 - Use the paragraph as your structural unit.
 - Include a topic sentence in each paragraph.
 - Use signpost words and phrases to guide the reader and connect one idea to the next: first, second, next, similarly, by contrast, for example, for instance, therefore, as this shows, unlike, on the other hand, furthermore, in addition, nevertheless, however, although, even though, despite, in spite of, as a result, more importantly, in summary, yet, thus, for instance, specifically, particularly, etc.
 - Use transitions appropriately. For example, you should consider concluding each major subtopic, example, argument, etc. with a brief summary that connects it back to your thesis. Then you would introduce the next one by commenting on how it is similar to, differs from, developed out of, caused, was caused by, etc. the last one. Again, use signpost words and phrases.
- Is my writing concise and is the style interesting? Be sure to:
 - Omit needless words.
 - Look for lifeless words that have no energy and convey no meaning. Rephrase to eliminate them.
 - Look for "to be" verbs. Rephrase to use action verbs.
 - Look for passive verbs. Rephrase to use active verbs.
 - Look for sentences containing numerous modifiers (adjectives, adverbs, modifying phrases and clauses). Rephrase to use well-chosen single words.
 - Omit repetition or redundancy.
 - Avoid paragraphs that include only one sentence—and pages that include only one paragraph!

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- Do the right points get emphasis? Do I sound smart? Be sure to:
 - Spill the beans.
 - Don't overstate or understate your thesis.
 - Be specific.
 - Use sentence structure to emphasize connections among ideas, such as similarities, contrasts, cause-and-effect relationships, and time sequences.
 - Vary sentence length and sentence structure. Don't start every sentence the same way.
 - Vary your vocabulary choices. Be careful not to overuse any words or phrases (especially within the same sentence or paragraph!)

Once you've reworked for **style** on your own, ask some friends, classmates, or relatives who are good **writers** or **editors** to read through the latest draft of your paper. Ask them to offer suggestions for improving your style. Once you've implemented their recommendations, review your latest draft (following the advice we've given above one more time).

Part 4: Reworking for Mechanics

With a **dictionary** and **grammar textbook** handy (along with your **style guide**), edit and proofread your research paper, addressing the following common issues:

Grammar and Usage

- Construct your sentences correctly:
 - Make sure your subjects and verbs agree, especially with indefinite and collective pronouns (singular and plural).
 - Use parallelism correctly (construct sentences using parallel grammatical forms for logically parallel ideas).
 - Use comparatives and superlatives correctly (use comparative adjectives and adverbs when comparing two; use superlatives when comparing three or more).
- Use words correctly, paying careful attention to commonly misused words (such as affect and effect; imply and infer; expect and suspect; allude and elude; preced and proceed; comprise, compose, and constitute; subscribe, ascribe, and prescribe; etc.) and the nuances of "synonyms."
- Construct your verb tenses correctly, paying careful attention to irregular verbs (such as forbid, forbade, forbidden; lie, lay, lain; mistake, mistook, mistaken; speak, spoke, spoken; take, took, taken; prove, proved, proven; show, showed, shown; etc.).
- Use pronouns properly, paying careful attention to subjective and objective forms of pronouns (such as he and him, they and them, we and us, etc.). Also, try to use gender-neutral language whenever possible. Using plurals can help you to avoid clunky and verbose constructions like "he or she," but don't use "they," "them," "their," and "theirs" as if they were singular pronouns!
- Try to avoid abbreviations, acronyms, jargon, contractions, and slang as much as possible.

Spelling

- Use "Spell Check" and "Grammar Check" (if available)—but **do not rely on them!**
- Watch out for homophones (such as there, their, they're; to, too, two; by, buy; lead, led; reigned, reined; seas, seize; passed, past; its, it's; cite, site, and sight; loose, lose; then, than; your, you're; hear, here; our, hour; principle, principal; allowed, aloud; etc.).
- Keep a notebook of your personal spelling demons.
- Learn to spell words related to your subject, especially key technical terms, names of noted authors, and historical figures.

Capitalization

- Capitalize titles when they are attached to a person's name or used to address that person.
- Capitalize direction words only when they refer to a part of the world, a country, or other region.
- Capitalize specific historic events.

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Punctuation

- Use commas correctly: after a long prepositional phrase that introduces a sentence; after a dependent clause that introduces a sentence; before the coordinating conjunction (and, but, or) in a compound sentence; before and after an interrupting phrase (like parentheses); and to separate items in a list or series of three or more elements.
- Use semicolons correctly: between the two independent clauses in a compound sentence that are not joined by a coordinating conjunction; and to separate items in a complex list or series of three or more elements that include commas themselves.
- Use colons correctly: to introduce a list; and to introduce an independent clause that is a restatement, illustration, amplification, or summary of the independent clause that preceded the colon.
- Use apostrophes correctly: to stand for letters that have been omitted from a contraction; to show possession, except in most pronouns.
- Use dashes correctly: use an en dash (–) with no spaces around it to separate number ranges (for example, “1941–45”); use an em dash (—) with no spaces around it between two clauses to show a shift or digression in the logic; a proper em dash is generally considered preferable to two hyphens (--). (Note: Use of the em dash in casual American writing has increased rapidly in recent years; some teachers and professors may find it too informal, so use it sparingly.)

Refer to the style guide you’re using (and/or your grammar textbook) for more information about all of these principles—and many other important conventions regarding mechanics.

Verb Tense

- Some style guides encourage you to use the present tense when referring to ideas presented in texts (even those from the distant past; for example, “Galileo suggests...”) and the past tense when referring to events from the distant past (for example, “The Inquisition persecuted...”). Others advocate using the present tense only for contemporary writing (for example, “Albert Einstein theorized...”, but “Stephen Hawking suggests...”). And some style guides offer little guidance on the subject at all. Follow any requirements that you find in the style guide you’re using, but, most of all, be consistent throughout your paper!

Typos

- Be especially careful to check for typos that “Spell Check” doesn’t normally catch (such as from and form; tough, though, thought, trough, through, and thorough; you and your; were, where, and we’re; the, them, and then; etc.).

A Final Reminder

Congratulations! You’re almost ready to hit “Print” one last time and hand in your research paper. We just have one more bit of advice for you...

PROOFREAD, PROOFREAD, PROOFREAD... and then ask *someone else* to **PROOFREAD** your paper!

Pay extra careful attention as you proofread these last few times to the spelling of words related to your subject, especially key terms, titles, and names—and double check your dates! A *single* careless typo, dating mistake, or mechanical error can result in a *lower grade* for even the most well-written research paper—especially if it’s a term, title, name, or date that you should have committed to memory by the end of your research. Once you’ve reworked for *mechanics* on your own, ask some friends, classmates, or relatives who are good *proofreaders* to read through the latest draft of your paper. Ask them to mark up your paper with all many corrections as they can find. You’ve done all of this hard work, spent all of that time poring over your research sources, and agonized over the wording and the formatting, so don’t let a silly mistake get you in the end—put your best foot forward! Good luck!